SŪRAH 59

Al-Ḥashr
(The Gathering)

Prologue

This *sūrah* was revealed shortly after the Muslims' encounter with the Jewish tribe of al-Naḍīr, which took place early in the fourth year following the Prophet's migration to Madīnah. It describes how the event occurred and why, and what regulations were put in place in the Muslim community once it was over. All this is reported in the unique style of the Qur'ān. Comments are added so as to educate the Muslim community and refine its attitudes, and the events themselves are used to highlight certain aspects and to give directives.

Before we discuss the *sūrah* in detail, we will look at some of the reports concerning the encounter that provided the occasion for its revelation. This will enable us to appreciate how the Qur'ān presents the story, firstly summing up its details and then looking far beyond these particular events to a much broader purpose.

These events took place after the Battle of Uḥud but before the Battle of the Moat. The Prophet along with ten leading figures from among his Companions, including Abū Bakr, 'Umar and 'Alī, had gone to the al-Naḍīr's quarters to request them to contribute to the blood money the Muslims had to pay for the accidental killing of two innocent men by 'Amr ibn Umayyah, one of the Prophet's Companions. The Prophet asked for their help on the basis of the covenant signed between the

Muslim community and the Jews of Madīnah soon after the Prophet's settlement there. The elders of al-Naḍīr received the Prophet well and asked him to wait while they raised the money. In actual fact, it occurred to them that this was their opportunity to assassinate the Prophet as he sat against the wall of one of their homes. Some of them said: "You will never find the man as easy prey as he is now. Let a strong person go onto the roof of the house next to which Muḥammad is sitting and drop a large stone or rock over his head and rid us of him." One of them, 'Amr ibn Jiḥāsh ibn Ka'b, volunteered to commit this treacherous crime, and went on to the roof of the house to throw such a stone on the Prophet's head. The Prophet, however, had been informed by God of the al-Naḍīr's design and so he had left his Companions where they were, giving the impression that he would shortly return. Instead, he had gone straight back to Madīnah. When the Prophet's Companions who were with him felt that he had been absent for too long, they started to worry and went looking for him. Soon they met a man on his way from Madīnah who told them that he had seen the Prophet entering the city.

In Madīnah, the Prophet had ordered his Companions to ready themselves to fight the al-Naḍīr because of their treachery, breaching the treaty between the two parties. Prior to that, one of their leading figures, Ka'b ibn al-Ashraf, had gone too far in abusing the Prophet and raising enemies against the Muslims. It had been reported to the Prophet that Ka'b ibn al-Ashraf and others from al-Naḍīr were in contact with the Quraysh aiming to forge an alliance with them so as to undermine the Muslim community; this despite the treaty they had with the Prophet. Hence why the Prophet gave Muḥammad ibn Maslamah permission to assassinate Ka'b ibn al-Ashraf, which he did.

As the Jews of al-Naḍīr tribe took treacherous steps against the Prophet and the Muslim community, it was necessary to revoke the treaty with them, in accordance with the Islamic rule that says: "*If you fear treachery from any folk, cast [your treaty with them] back to them in a fair manner. God does not love the treacherous.*" (8: 58)

When the Prophet and his Companions were ready, they laid siege to the al-Naḍīr in their quarters, giving them three days' notice to vacate and leave their homes. Some reports suggest that the notice gave them ten days. They were allowed to take all their possessions with them

and to appoint agents to manage their fields and farms on their behalf. However, the hypocrites in Madīnah, led by ʿAbdullāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl, sent word to them encouraging them to resist and pledging their support. They assured them that they would fight alongside them, and should they be made to leave, they promised to leave with them. It is in reference to these assurances that the *sūrah* says: "*Are you not aware of those hypocrites who say to their brethren who disbelieve among the people of earlier revelations, 'If you are driven out, we shall most certainly go with you, and shall never pay heed to anyone against you; and if you are attacked, we shall most certainly come to your aid'? God bears witness that they are indeed liars. If they are driven out, they will not go with them; and if they are attacked, they will not help them. Even if they come to their aid, they will most certainly turn their backs in flight; and in the end they will have no help. You, [believers,] arouse in their hearts a fear more intense than their fear of God, because they are devoid of understanding.*" (Verses 11–13)

The al-Naḍīr withdrew to their forts. The Prophet ordered that their palm trees should be cut and burnt. They called out to him, saying: 'Muḥammad! You have always criticized those who destroy places and lay land to waste. How come that you are now felling palm trees and burning them?' In reply, the *sūrah* states: "*Whatever of their palm trees you [believers] may have cut down or left standing on their roots, it was done by God's leave, so that He might disgrace the transgressors.*" (Verse 5)

After 26 nights of siege, the al-Naḍīr despaired that the promises of their hypocrite friends would ever come true. God had cast terror in their hearts. They sent to the Prophet requesting him to allow them to leave on the same terms as the Qaynuqāʿ Jews who had earlier been evacuated.[1] This would afford them safe conduct and they would be allowed to take what their camels could carry of their possessions, except their arms. The Prophet accepted this. Thus, they loaded their camels with their possessions. They also destroyed their own homes so that these would not be taken over by Muslims. During the siege, the Muslims had destroyed some of the walls of their fortifications. In reference to this, the *sūrah* says: "*It is He who drove the unbelievers among the people*

1. The details of that evacuation are given in our commentary on *Sūrah* 33, Volume XIV, pp. 52–54.

of earlier revelations out of their homes at the first gathering. You never thought they would go; while they thought that their fortifications would protect them against God. God came upon them from where they had not expected, casting terror into their hearts. Thus, they destroyed their homes by their own hands, as well as the hands of the believers. Learn from their example, you who are endowed with insight. Had it not been for God's having decreed exile for them, He would surely have inflicted [greater] suffering on them in this world. In the life to come they will still endure suffering through the fire because they have defied God and His Messenger. Whoever defies God – well, God is severe in retribution." (Verses 2–4)

Some of the al-Naḍīr went to Khaybar, others headed for Syria. Among their leading figures who headed for Khaybar were Sallām ibn Mishkam ibn Abū al-Ḥuqayq, his cousin Kinānah ibn al-Rabī' ibn Abī al-Ḥuqayq and Ḥuyayy ibn Akhṭab to whom reference is made in *Sūrah* 33; these managed to raise an alliance against the Muslim community, leading to the Battle of the Moat. Some of them are also referred to in *Sūrah* 48, in connection with the Battle of Khaybar.

The property left behind by the al-Naḍīr tribe was a free gain for the Prophet. The Muslims had not had to spur a horse or a camel in order to achieve that gain. Therefore, it belonged purely to God and His Messenger. The Prophet divided it among the Muhājirīn, his Companions who had migrated from Makkah, and two from among the Anṣār, Sahl ibn Ḥanīf and Abū Dujānah ibn Simāk, both of whom were poor. The Muhājirīn had no property in Madīnah, having had to abandon everything they had in Makkah. The Anṣār welcomed them and accommodated them in their own homes, showing a very high degree of generosity and hospitality. As this occasion presented itself, the Prophet wanted to set things right within the Muslim community, so that the poor would have their own property. Thus, wealth would not circulate only among the rich in society.

Some people – most probably hypocrites – spoke out, criticizing the Prophet's action. God states in this *sūrah*: "*Whatever gains were taken from them God has turned over to His Messenger; you did not have to spur horse or riding-camel for its sake. God gives His messengers mastery over whomever He wills. God has power over all things.*" (Verse 6) The Prophet said to the Anṣār: "If you wish, you may give a share of your property

and your homes to your brethren, the Muhājirīn, and then you will share with them this gain. On the other hand, if you prefer, you keep your property and your homes for yourselves but you will have no share of this gain." True to their generous character, the Anṣār said: "We will give them a share of our property and homes and we will leave this gain to them, taking no share of it."

Commenting on this, the *sūrah* says: "*[Such gains are for] the poor migrants who have been driven out of their homes and possessions, seeking God's favour and His goodly acceptance, and who help God and His Messenger. These are the ones who are true. And to those who were already firmly established in their homes and in faith, those who love the ones that seek refuge with them and harbour no desire in their hearts for whatever the others may have been given. They give them preference over themselves, even though they are in want. Those who are saved from their own greed are truly successful.*" (Verses 8–9)

Such were the events that led to the revelation of this *sūrah*, and to which its statements and rules refer, including the verses close to its end which address the believers who witnessed these events. This is in line with the Qur'ānic method of educating believers and refining their Islamic sense as it comments on events and demonstrates the link between them and fundamental truths. The last note in the *sūrah* mentions a number of God's attributes that have a direct bearing on the universe and its affairs. When these are fully understood, belief in God becomes enlightened, based on full awareness of the truth.

The *sūrah* begins and ends with glorification of God, to whom the heavens and the earth belong, the Almighty, the Wise. Thus, the beginning and end are in perfect harmony with the subject matter of the *sūrah* and the call to the believers to remain God-fearing and to reflect on God's planning.

Al-Ḥashr (The Gathering)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Everything in the heavens and everything on earth extols God's limitless glory. He is the Almighty, the Wise. (1)

سَبَّحَ لِلَّهِ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ ۖ وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ ﴿١﴾

It is He who drove the unbelievers among the people of earlier revelations out of their homes at the first gathering. You never thought they would go; while they thought that their fortifications would protect them against God. God came upon them from where they had not expected, casting terror into their hearts. Thus, they destroyed their homes by their own hands, as well as the hands of the believers. Learn from their example, you who are endowed with insight. (2)

هُوَ الَّذِي أَخْرَجَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنْ أَهْلِ الْكِتَابِ مِن دِيَارِهِمْ لِأَوَّلِ الْحَشْرِ ۚ مَا ظَنَنتُمْ أَن يَخْرُجُوا ۖ وَظَنُّوا أَنَّهُم مَّانِعَتُهُمْ حُصُونُهُم مِّنَ اللَّهِ فَأَتَاهُمُ اللَّهُ مِنْ حَيْثُ لَمْ يَحْتَسِبُوا ۖ وَقَذَفَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمُ الرُّعْبَ يُخْرِبُونَ بُيُوتَهُم بِأَيْدِيهِمْ وَأَيْدِي الْمُؤْمِنِينَ فَاعْتَبِرُوا يَا أُولِي الْأَبْصَارِ ﴿٢﴾

Had it not been for God's having decreed exile for them, He would surely have inflicted [greater] suffering on them in this world. In the life to come they will still endure suffering through the fire (3)

وَلَوْلَا أَن كَتَبَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمُ الْجَلَاءَ لَعَذَّبَهُمْ فِي الدُّنْيَا ۖ وَلَهُمْ فِي الْآخِرَةِ عَذَابُ النَّارِ ﴿٣﴾

because they have defied God and His Messenger. Whoever defies God – well, God is severe in retribution. (4)

ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ شَآقُّوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُۥ ۖ وَمَن يُشَآقِّ ٱللَّهَ فَإِنَّ ٱللَّهَ شَدِيدُ ٱلْعِقَابِ ﴿٤﴾

Whatever of their palm trees you [believers] may have cut down or left standing on their roots, it was done by God's leave, so that He might disgrace the transgressors. (5)

مَا قَطَعْتُم مِّن لِّينَةٍ أَوْ تَرَكْتُمُوهَا قَآئِمَةً عَلَىٰٓ أُصُولِهَا فَبِإِذْنِ ٱللَّهِ وَلِيُخْزِىَ ٱلْفَٰسِقِينَ ﴿٥﴾

Whatever gains were taken from them God has turned over to His Messenger; you did not have to spur horse or riding-camel for its sake. God gives His messengers mastery over whomever He wills. God has power over all things. (6)

وَمَآ أَفَآءَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ رَسُولِهِۦ مِنْهُمْ فَمَآ أَوْجَفْتُمْ عَلَيْهِ مِنْ خَيْلٍ وَلَا رِكَابٍ وَلَٰكِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُسَلِّطُ رُسُلَهُۥ عَلَىٰ مَن يَشَآءُ ۚ وَٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَىْءٍ قَدِيرٌ ﴿٦﴾

Whatever gains God turns over to His Messenger from the people of the townships belong to God, the Messenger, kinsfolk, orphans, the needy and the traveller in need. Thus, they would not just circulate among those of you who are rich. Whatever the Messenger gives you, take it; and whatever he forbids you, abstain from it. Remain God-fearing; for God is severe in retribution. (7)

مَّآ أَفَآءَ ٱللَّهُ عَلَىٰ رَسُولِهِۦ مِنْ أَهْلِ ٱلْقُرَىٰ فَلِلَّهِ وَلِلرَّسُولِ وَلِذِى ٱلْقُرْبَىٰ وَٱلْيَتَٰمَىٰ وَٱلْمَسَٰكِينِ وَٱبْنِ ٱلسَّبِيلِ كَىْ لَا يَكُونَ دُولَةًۢ بَيْنَ ٱلْأَغْنِيَآءِ مِنكُمْ ۚ وَمَآ ءَاتَىٰكُمُ ٱلرَّسُولُ فَخُذُوهُ وَمَا نَهَىٰكُمْ عَنْهُ فَٱنتَهُوا۟ ۚ وَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ ۖ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ شَدِيدُ ٱلْعِقَابِ ﴿٧﴾

لِلْفُقَرَاءِ الْمُهَاجِرِينَ الَّذِينَ أُخْرِجُوا مِن
دِيَارِهِمْ وَأَمْوَالِهِمْ يَبْتَغُونَ فَضْلًا مِّنَ
اللَّهِ وَرِضْوَانًا وَيَنصُرُونَ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ ۚ
أُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الصَّادِقُونَ ﴿٨﴾

[Such gains are for] the poor migrants who have been driven out of their homes and possessions, seeking God's favour and His goodly acceptance, and who help God and His Messenger. These are the ones who are true. (8)

وَالَّذِينَ تَبَوَّءُو الدَّارَ وَالْإِيمَانَ مِن
قَبْلِهِمْ يُحِبُّونَ مَنْ هَاجَرَ إِلَيْهِمْ
وَلَا يَجِدُونَ فِي صُدُورِهِمْ حَاجَةً
مِّمَّا أُوتُوا وَيُؤْثِرُونَ عَلَىٰ أَنفُسِهِمْ
وَلَوْ كَانَ بِهِمْ خَصَاصَةٌ ۚ وَمَن يُوقَ شُحَّ
نَفْسِهِ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ ﴿٩﴾

And to those who were already firmly established in the Home and in faith, those who love the ones that seek refuge with them and harbour no desire in their hearts for whatever the others may have been given. They give them preference over themselves, even though they are in want. Those who are saved from their own greed are truly successful. (9)

وَالَّذِينَ جَاءُو مِن بَعْدِهِمْ يَقُولُونَ
رَبَّنَا اغْفِرْ لَنَا وَلِإِخْوَانِنَا الَّذِينَ
سَبَقُونَا بِالْإِيمَانِ وَلَا تَجْعَلْ فِي قُلُوبِنَا
غِلًّا لِّلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا رَبَّنَا إِنَّكَ رَءُوفٌ
رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١٠﴾

Those who come after them pray: 'Our Lord! Forgive us and forgive our brethren who preceded us in faith. Leave no malice in our hearts towards those who believe. Lord, You are compassionate, ever merciful.' (10)

أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَى الَّذِينَ نَافَقُوا يَقُولُونَ
لِإِخْوَانِهِمُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنْ أَهْلِ
الْكِتَابِ لَئِنْ أُخْرِجْتُمْ لَنَخْرُجَنَّ

Are you not aware of those hypocrites who say to their brethren who disbelieve among the people of earlier revelations, 'If you are driven out, we shall most certainly go with you, and shall

مَعَكُمْ وَلَا نُطِيعُ فِيكُمْ أَحَدًا أَبَدًا وَإِن
قُوتِلْتُمْ لَنَنصُرَنَّكُمْ وَاللَّهُ يَشْهَدُ إِنَّهُمْ
لَكَاذِبُونَ ﴿١١﴾

never pay heed to anyone against you; and if you are attacked, we shall most certainly come to your aid'? God bears witness that they are indeed liars. (11)

لَئِنْ أُخْرِجُوا لَا يَخْرُجُونَ مَعَهُمْ وَلَئِن
قُوتِلُوا لَا يَنصُرُونَهُمْ وَلَئِن نَّصَرُوهُمْ
لَيُوَلُّنَّ الْأَدْبَارَ ثُمَّ لَا يُنصَرُونَ ﴿١٢﴾

If they are driven out, they will not go with them; and if they are attacked, they will not help them. Even if they come to their aid, they will most certainly turn their backs in flight; and in the end they will have no help. (12)

لَأَنتُمْ أَشَدُّ رَهْبَةً فِي صُدُورِهِم مِّنَ
اللَّهِ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ قَوْمٌ لَّا يَفْقَهُونَ ﴿١٣﴾

You, [believers,] arouse in their hearts a fear more intense than their fear of God, because they are devoid of understanding. (13)

لَا يُقَاتِلُونَكُمْ جَمِيعًا إِلَّا فِي قُرًى
مُّحَصَّنَةٍ أَوْ مِن وَرَاءِ جُدُرٍ ۚ بَأْسُهُمْ بَيْنَهُمْ
شَدِيدٌ ۚ تَحْسَبُهُمْ جَمِيعًا وَقُلُوبُهُمْ شَتَّىٰ ۚ
ذَٰلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ قَوْمٌ لَّا يَعْقِلُونَ ﴿١٤﴾

They will never fight you even in a body except from within fortified strongholds or from behind walls. Strong is their internal hostility. You may think that they are united when in fact their hearts are at odds with one another, because they are people who will not use their reason. (14)

كَمَثَلِ الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِهِمْ قَرِيبًا ذَاقُوا
وَبَالَ أَمْرِهِمْ وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ أَلِيمٌ ﴿١٥﴾

Like those who, a short while before them, had to taste the evil that came from their own doings. Painful suffering is in store for them. (15)

كَمَثَلِ ٱلشَّيْطَٰنِ إِذْ قَالَ لِلْإِنسَٰنِ ٱكْفُرْ
فَلَمَّا كَفَرَ قَالَ إِنِّى بَرِىٓءٌ مِّنكَ إِنِّىٓ
أَخَافُ ٱللَّهَ رَبَّ ٱلْعَٰلَمِينَ ﴿١٦﴾

Like Satan, who says to man, 'Reject the faith!' Yet when man disbelieves, Satan says, 'I here and now disown you. I fear God, the Lord of all the worlds.' (16)

فَكَانَ عَٰقِبَتَهُمَآ أَنَّهُمَا فِى ٱلنَّارِ خَٰلِدَيْنِ
فِيهَا ۚ وَذَٰلِكَ جَزَٰٓؤُا۟ ٱلظَّٰلِمِينَ ﴿١٧﴾

Both will end up in the fire, where they will abide. Such is the reward of the wrongdoers. (17)

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا۟ ٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ وَلْتَنظُرْ
نَفْسٌ مَّا قَدَّمَتْ لِغَدٍ ۖ وَٱتَّقُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ ۚ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ
خَبِيرٌۢ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴿١٨﴾

Believers, have fear of God. Let every soul consider carefully what it sends ahead for tomorrow. Remain God-fearing, for God is fully aware of all that you do. (18)

وَلَا تَكُونُوا۟ كَٱلَّذِينَ نَسُوا۟ ٱللَّهَ فَأَنسَىٰهُمْ
أَنفُسَهُمْ ۚ أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلْفَٰسِقُونَ ﴿١٩﴾

Be not like those who forget God, so God causes them to forget their own souls. They are the transgressors. (19)

لَا يَسْتَوِىٓ أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلنَّارِ وَأَصْحَٰبُ ٱلْجَنَّةِ ۚ
أَصْحَٰبُ ٱلْجَنَّةِ هُمُ ٱلْفَآئِزُونَ ﴿٢٠﴾

Not equal are the ones destined for the fire and the ones destined for paradise. Those who are destined for paradise are indeed the ones who will triumph. (20)

لَوْ أَنزَلْنَا هَٰذَا ٱلْقُرْءَانَ عَلَىٰ جَبَلٍ لَّرَأَيْتَهُۥ
خَٰشِعًا مُّتَصَدِّعًا مِّنْ خَشْيَةِ ٱللَّهِ ۚ
وَتِلْكَ ٱلْأَمْثَٰلُ نَضْرِبُهَا لِلنَّاسِ
لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ ﴿٢١﴾

Had We brought down this Qur'ān upon a mountain, you would have seen it humble itself and break asunder for fear of God. We put such images before people so that they may reflect. (21)

هُوَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِى لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ۖ عَٰلِمُ
ٱلْغَيْبِ وَٱلشَّهَٰدَةِ ۖ هُوَ ٱلرَّحْمَٰنُ
ٱلرَّحِيمُ ﴿٢٢﴾

He is God: there is no deity other than Him. It is He who knows all that is beyond the reach of anyone's perception, as well as all that which can be witnessed. He is the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful. (22)

هُوَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلَّذِى لَآ إِلَٰهَ إِلَّا هُوَ ٱلْمَلِكُ
ٱلْقُدُّوسُ ٱلسَّلَٰمُ ٱلْمُؤْمِنُ ٱلْمُهَيْمِنُ
ٱلْعَزِيزُ ٱلْجَبَّارُ ٱلْمُتَكَبِّرُ ۚ
سُبْحَٰنَ ٱللَّهِ عَمَّا يُشْرِكُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

He is God: there is no deity other than Him, the Sovereign, the Holy, the Source of Peace, the Giver of Faith, the Guardian over all, the Almighty, the Compeller, to whom all greatness belongs. Exalted is God in His limitless glory above anything they associate as partner with Him. (23)

هُوَ ٱللَّهُ ٱلْخَٰلِقُ ٱلْبَارِئُ ٱلْمُصَوِّرُ ۖ لَهُ
ٱلْأَسْمَآءُ ٱلْحُسْنَىٰ ۚ يُسَبِّحُ لَهُۥ مَا فِى
ٱلسَّمَٰوَٰتِ وَٱلْأَرْضِ ۖ وَهُوَ ٱلْعَزِيزُ
ٱلْحَكِيمُ ﴿٢٤﴾

He is God: the Creator, the Maker who gives shape and form to all. His are the most gracious names. Everything in the heavens and earth extols His limitless glory. He alone is the Almighty, the Wise. (24)

God's Direct Action

Everything in the heavens and everything on earth extols God's limitless glory. He is the Almighty, the Wise. (Verse 1)

This opening verse states a truth that takes place in the universe, where everything in the heavens and earth extols God's glory and praises Him alone. This is how the *sūrah* that relates the events leading to the evacuation of the unbelievers among the people of earlier revelations and

giving their land as a free gain to the believers who extol His glory and praise Him with His attributes begins. It is He who is the Almighty, able to give victory to those who believe in Him and destroy His enemies, the Wise who plans everything in accordance with a definite purpose.

The *sūrah* then gives us an account of the events leading to its revelation:

> *It is He who drove the unbelievers among the people of earlier revelations out of their homes at the first gathering. You never thought they would go; while they thought that their fortifications would protect them against God. God came upon them from where they had not expected, casting terror into their hearts. Thus, they destroyed their homes by their own hands, as well as the hands of the believers. Learn from their example, you who are endowed with insight. Had it not been for God's having decreed exile for them, He would surely have inflicted [greater] suffering on them in this world. In the life to come they will still endure suffering through the fire because they have defied God and His Messenger. Whoever defies God – well, God is severe in retribution.* (Verses 2–4)

From these verses we learn that it was God who drove those unbelievers among the people of earlier revelations out of their homes, which is described here as the first gathering. God is indeed the doer of whatever takes place, but the way the statement is phrased lays direct emphasis on this fact, implying that God undertook to drive them out, without putting it under the cover of human action. It was He who drove them to the land from where they will be gathered, which means that they could not return to the land from which they were evacuated.

God's direct action is further emphasized in the following sentences in the verse: "*You never thought they would go; while they thought that their fortifications would protect them against God.*" (Verse 2) You did not expect them to leave, and they could not have imagined that this would happen to them. Within their fortifications, so they believed, they were just too strong to be driven out. They felt themselves secure, forgetting God's power that cannot be stopped by mere fortifications.

"*God came upon them from where they had not expected, casting terror into their hearts.*" (Verse 2) He came upon them from within themselves,

not from within their fortifications. He struck fear in their hearts, and so they opened the gates to their fortifications with their own hands. He showed them that they were not in possession of their own souls, and could not control their hearts. They could not defy God with their willpower, let alone with buildings and forts. They reckoned with every possibility except that they would be attacked from within themselves. Thus is the case when God wills something to happen. He approaches it as He knows best and from where He can; He certainly knows everything and is able to accomplish what He wants. There is no need, then, for the means people resort to. Instead, the means for Him are always there, ready to use. All means and causes are of His own making; none is difficult for Him to employ. He is indeed the Almighty, the Wise.

Those unbelievers from among the people of earlier revelations sought to shield themselves from attack by staying within their fortifications, but God came upon them from where they least expected, scaring them to the bone. They thought they had protection within their homes, but God made them destroy their own homes themselves and He allowed the believers to partake in this destruction: "*Thus, they destroyed their homes by their own hands, as well as the hands of the believers.*" (Verse 2) Thus the account of what happened to those people is complete, portrayed in a telling image.

Here the *sūrah* adds the first comment: "*Learn from their example, you who are endowed with insight.*" (Verse 2) This instruction comes at the right moment, when minds are ready to receive a lesson and learn from it.

The next verse establishes that since God willed to take them to task for their treachery, they could not escape some form of punishment in this life, in addition to what awaits them in the life to come: "*Had it not been for God's having decreed exile for them, He would surely have inflicted [greater] suffering on them in this world. In the life to come they will still endure suffering through the fire.*" (Verse 3) That they would be made to suffer in this life, in some form or another, was a foregone conclusion. Had God not chosen their evacuation, He would have punished them in some other way, and whatever punishment they would have suffered in this life was in addition to what they will receive in the hereafter.

They merited both, "*because they have defied God and His Messenger. Whoever defies God – well, God is severe in retribution.*" (Verse 4) The Arabic word, *shāqqū*, translated here as 'defied', means to take a side other than God's. As He explains why they merited such punishment, God made His Messenger's side His own. Therefore, in the second half of the verse He mentions their being in defiance of Him only, as this automatically includes defying the Prophet. When defiant people take a side opposite to God's, they behave insolently. Rather stupidly, such small, powerless creatures expose themselves to God's anger and incur His severe retribution.

Thus, as we look at what happened to those unbelievers of the people of earlier religions, we understand the fate that is bound to overtake those who defy God at any time and place. We should not fail to notice that the *sūrah* repeatedly refers to them as '*unbelievers from among the people of earlier revelations*'. This is certainly true because they disbelieved in the divine faith in its final and complete form revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him). Those Jews were expecting his message. Moreover, referring to them in this way explains why they were punished. It also reassures the believers of the correctness of what they did to them.

The *sūrah* then reassures the believers that all that they did to those who defied God and His Messenger, such as cutting and burning their palm trees, was right. It thus gives God's verdict on it, particularly because some Muslims were rather unsure about their actions:

> *Whatever of their palm trees you [believers] may have cut down or left standing on their roots, it was done by God's leave, so that He might disgrace the transgressors.* (Verse 5)

Prior to this event and subsequently, the Muslims were and are not permitted to cause such destruction. This case, then, provided an exception, and it needed explanation and reassurance. It is thus explained in this verse that both what they did or did not do in respect of the palm trees was by God's permission. It is He who handled this encounter, putting His will into effect. All that happened was by His leave, for the purpose of bringing disgrace upon the transgressors. Cutting their trees

caused the al-Naḍīr grief, while leaving some standing similarly grieved them because they had to leave these behind.

Thus the believers were reassured that they were only the tool for God's will to be fulfilled.

Gains Achieved Without a War

The second part of the *sūrah* lays down the rules concerning gains that were granted by God to the Muslim community in this encounter and in similar ones, where the Muslims achieved victory without having to fight. These rules apply to any conflict where God's hand works directly, without human cover:

> *Whatever gains were taken from them God has turned over to His Messenger; you did not have to spur horse or riding-camel for its sake. God gives His messengers mastery over whomever He wills. God has power over all things. Whatever gains God turns over to His Messenger from the people of the townships belong to God, the Messenger, kinsfolk, orphans, the needy and the traveller in need. Thus, they would not just circulate among those of you who are rich. Whatever the Messenger gives you, take it; and whatever he forbids you, abstain from it. Remain God-fearing; for God is severe in retribution. [Such gains are for] the poor migrants who have been driven out of their homes and possessions, seeking God's favour and His goodly acceptance, and who help God and His Messenger. These are the ones who are true. And to those who were already firmly established in the Home and in faith, those who love the ones that seek refuge with them and harbour no desire in their hearts for whatever the others may have been given. They give them preference over themselves, even though they are in want. Those who are saved from their own greed are truly successful. Those who come after them pray: 'Our Lord! Forgive us and forgive our brethren who preceded us in faith. Leave no malice in our hearts towards those who believe. Lord, You are compassionate, ever merciful.* (Verses 6–10)

These verses include a description of the conditions prevailing for the Muslim community at that time. They also state the nature and

distinctive features of the Muslim community that make its strong bonds survive from one generation, race and individual to another, across the centuries and throughout the world. This is a great truth that we should reflect upon.

"*Whatever gains were taken from them God has turned over to His Messenger; you did not have to spur horse or riding-camel for its sake. God gives His messengers mastery over whomever He wills. God has power over all things.*" (Verse 6) This verse mentions that these gains left over by the al-Naḍīr Jews were taken by the Muslims without them having to ride a horse or a camel, let alone fight in order to lay their hands upon them. Hence, it is not to be treated like war booty. Only one fifth of what the Muslims gain in war is reserved for God, His Messenger, his own kinsfolk, orphans, the needy and travellers in want. The rest, i.e. four-fifths, is distributed among those who take part in the war itself. This rule concerning war gains was laid down in *Sūrah* 8, The Spoils of War, revealed shortly after the Battle of Badr. Here, however, the present *sūrah* rules that these new gains, made without a fight, belong only to God, His Messenger, his own kinsfolk, orphans, the needy and travellers in want. It is God's Messenger who undertakes the spending of these gains in this way and for these purposes.

The Prophet's own kinsfolk are singled out here as beneficiaries of such gains because the poor among them are not allowed to take *zakāt* money or charity. Moreover, the Prophet was not to be inherited by his relatives. Whatever he left behind was to be given to charity, charity in which his relatives had no share.[2] Since there were poor people among his relatives, God gave them a share of any war gains as well as gains made without war. They were included among the beneficiaries of enemy gains that God had assigned to His Messenger: one fifth of war gains and all gains without war. The other beneficiaries of these gains are well known.

This ruling is clearly stated in the *sūrah*. However, it does not stop at stating the immediate reason for this ruling, but rather opens our eyes

2. Scholars differ as to whether only the poor among the Prophet's relatives received this share, or whether it was given to all of them, even those who were not poor. The weightier view is that they all received a share.

to an important truth: "*God gives His messengers mastery over whomever He wills.*" (Verse 6) It is all by God's will, and His messengers are part of that will, giving them power over anyone or any community He chooses: "*God has power over all things.*" (Verse 6)

Thus the role of God's messengers is seen to be closely linked to God's direct will. Although they are ordinary human beings, they have a special link with God's will, giving them a particular role in how God brings about what He wants to happen on earth. They do not act at their own behest; nor do they take or leave anything for their own interest. When they go to war, face anyone in conflict, or make peace with any one, they only do so to fulfil an aspect of God's will that has been made dependent on their own actions. It is God who is the actor behind all this. It is He who has power over all things.

Money Circulation

"*Whatever gains God turns over to His Messenger from the people of the townships belong to God, the Messenger, kinsfolk, orphans, the needy and the traveller in need. Thus, they would not just circulate among those of you who are rich. Whatever the Messenger gives you, take it; and whatever he forbids you, abstain from it. Remain God-fearing; for God is severe in retribution.*" (Verse 7) This verse gives the details of the ruling before stating a major rule of the Muslim community's economic and social system: thus, money "*would not just circulate among those of you who are rich.*" (Verse 7) This is followed by a major constitutional rule: "*Whatever the Messenger gives you, take it; and whatever he forbids you, abstain from it.*" (Verse 7) Although these two rules are stated in connection with the gains made in this encounter and how they were to be distributed, both rules go beyond the immediate event to state fundamental principles for the Islamic social system.

The first of these two rules defines a major aspect of the Islamic economic system which approves private ownership but makes it subject to this rule that excludes the possibility of wealth being circulated only among the rich in society. Whatever situation leads to the poor being outside the general circulation of wealth, keeping it only in the hands of

the rich, is contrary to the Islamic economic system and works against one of its major social organization objectives. All transactions in the Muslim community must be so organized so as not to allow such a situation to develop, and to dismantle it if it does exist.

The Islamic system is actually based on this rule. Thus, it makes *zakāt* an essential duty. Its revenue consists of 2.5% of money including financial assets, 5% or 10% of all agricultural produce, a similar percentage of cattle and one-fifth of mineral resources.[3] These are substantial shares. In addition, Islam gives 80% of war gains to those who so fight, whether they are rich or poor, but gains made without war are paid totally to those in need. The system Islam approves of for renting agricultural land is based on sharing the produce between the owner and the renter. Moreover, the Islamic system allows the Islamic government, in periods of hardship, to take all surplus the rich have to distribute to the poor. If it happens that the state treasury runs out of funds, such surplus may be invested for the public interest. Islam strictly forbids monopoly and usury, which are the two main tools that lead to money being circulated purely among the rich. This shows that the whole economic system Islam lays down is geared to implementing this most important rule. Furthermore, whilst this constitutes a major check on private ownership, Islam also places other checks on it as well.[4]

Thus, we see that the Islamic system allows for private ownership, but it is not a capitalist system. Nor is capitalism borrowed from the Islamic economic system. No capitalist system can function without monopoly or usury. The Islamic system is unique, laid down by the One who is Wise, All-Aware. It started on its own, developed on its own and remains unique, well balanced between rights and duties. It maintains the same balance as the rest of the universe, because it is made by the Creator of the universe.

3. The author mentions that the *zakāt* revenue from mineral resources is taxed at the same percentage as money. This is either a mistake or based on a certain scholar's view. The consensus is rather that one-fifth of mineral resources is paid to *zakāt*. – Editor's note.

4. This is explained in detail in a chapter on 'monetary policy' in our book *Social Justice in Islam*, which is available in English.

The Only Source of Legislation

The second rule laid down in the verse defines the only source of legislation: "*Whatever the Messenger gives you, take it; and whatever he forbids you, abstain from it.*" (Verse 7) This rule sums up the Islamic constitution. The authority of the law in the Islamic system is based on the fact that legislation is given to us by the Prophet in the form of the Qur'ān or the *Sunnah*. The entire community, including the ruler and government machinery, cannot enact any law that is contrary to what is given to us by the Prophet. Should it enact such a law, that law is devoid of authority, because it lacks the very basis of authority. This system is contrary to all man-made theories, including those which make the community, or the nation, the source of all authorities, giving the nation the right to enact whatever legislations it chooses. Under Islam, authority belongs to God's legislation as stated and explained by His Messenger. The Muslim community's role is to keep Islamic law intact and to implement it. The ruler and the government undertake this task on behalf of the community. These are the limits of the Muslim community, and it cannot act contrary to what the Prophet has stated in any aspect of the law.

In any area where no legislation is stated, the community may enact what it deems to be suitable, provided that it is not contrary to any principle stated by the Prophet. This is part of the Islamic system. Any legislation to be enacted must follow what the Prophet taught, if there is a statement about it, and must not be in conflict with any Islamic principle if no such statement is available. The authority of the Muslim community, and its government, remains within these limits. This is a unique system, unlike any man-made system. It ensures harmony between the legislation for human society, which is from God, and the law that governs the universe, which is set by God. Should there be conflict between human law and universal law, man would be in utter misery.

The Qur'ānic verse inspires believers' hearts to see the link between these two major rules and their original source, i.e. God, calling on them to remain conscious of Him: "*Remain God-fearing; for God is severe in retribution.*" (Verse 7) This is the best guarantee that cannot

be evaded. Believers realize that God knows their inner thoughts and feelings, is aware of all actions, and that to Him all will return. They also know that His punishment is severe indeed. They are aware that God wants them to ensure that wealth does not circulate only among the rich in the community. They further know that it is their duty to accept willingly and obediently whatever the Prophet gives them and to discard whatever he forbids them.

The distribution of the gains made from the al-Naḍīr among the Muhājirīn only and two people from the Anṣār was a special measure that applied only in this case, to achieve the purpose of the main rule that states that wealth "*would not just circulate among those of you who are rich.*" (Verse 7) The general rule is that it should be divided among the poor generally, from among the Muhājirīn and the Anṣār, and also those of later generations. This is stated in the verses that follow. However, the Qur'ān does not state its rulings in abstracts. It puts them in a context that interacts with people. Hence, it gives each one of the three groups qualities that mirror its true nature.

Three Groups of Distinction

"*[Such gains are for] the poor migrants who have been driven out of their homes and possessions, seeking God's favour and His goodly acceptance, and who help God and His Messenger. These are the ones who are true.*" (Verse 8) This is a true picture highlighting the main features of the Muhājirīn. They were certainly forced to flee their home town, Makkah, under much pressure and persecution by their own kinsfolk and tribesmen. They committed no offence other than believing in God alone. They abandoned their homes and possessions "*seeking God's favour and His goodly acceptance.*" (Verse 8) They realized that they had no helper or protector other than Him. Although they were few in number, chased everywhere, they "*help God and His Messenger,*" with their hearts and swords, even at the hardest and most critical of times. Hence, they have earned the good description given to them in the Qur'ān: "*These are the ones who are true.*" (Verse 8) They said the word indicating their belief and confirmed it with their actions. They were true to their claim that they had chosen Him above all else, and true to their pledge to God's

Messenger that they would follow him. They were true to the truth, making of themselves a living version of it.

"*And to those who were already firmly established in the Home and in faith, those who love the ones that seek refuge with them and harbour no desire in their hearts for whatever the others may have been given. They give them preference over themselves, even though they are in want. Those who are saved from their own greed are truly successful.*" (Verse 9) This is again a bright, true picture showing the Anṣār's main distinctive features. These were a unique group of people. They achieved, in practice, standards which most people would think too idealistic to be true and rose to levels that were too high even for our imaginations.

"*And to those who were already firmly established in the Home and in faith.*" (Verse 9) The Home means the town, Yathrib, to which the Prophet and his followers in Makkah migrated. Thereafter, it has been known as Madīnah, meaning The City, or the Prophet's own city. The Anṣār were firmly settled there, long before the arrival of the Muhājirīn. They were also firmly established in faith, as if faith had become a part of their own dwelling place. The image here has clear connotations, yet it is the closest description of the Anṣār's attitude towards faith. It became their place of living where their hearts and souls settled in peace. They flocked to it like homing pigeons.

The Anṣār "*love the ones that seek refuge with them and harbour no desire in their hearts for whatever the others may have been given.*" (Verse 9) We do not find in human history an event similar to the reception given by the Anṣār to the Muhājirīn: it reflected genuine love and unparalleled generosity. The Anṣār happily shared their possessions with their immigrant brethren, competing with each other in offering them their homes and shouldering the burden of hospitality. It is reported that in every case, lots were drawn to decide where each one of the Muhājirīn would settle, because the numbers of the Anṣār offering their homes were more than the numbers of the Muhājirīn needing to be settled. They "*harbour no desire in their hearts for whatever the others may have been given.*" (Verse 9) The Muhājirīn are, at times, given an exceptionally high position, but the Anṣār harbour no feeling of envy as a result. They may be given special treatment, as in the case of the gains made in this encounter. Again the Anṣār accept this willingly.

We note that the verse does not say that they 'harbour no grudge', but rather it uses the word 'desire', which adds to the impression we have of the Anṣār's pure hearts.

"*They give them preference over themselves, even though they are in want.*" (Verse 9) To give preference to others when one is in need oneself is a high summit to reach, one which the Anṣār scaled in a way unknown anywhere else in human history. This was their true description in every case. They always exceeded what is normal in people's lives.

"*Those who are saved from their own greed are truly successful.*" (Verse 9) It is personal greed that hinders every good thing. Goodness means giving in one way or another: one gives away money, love, emotions, effort and indeed one gives one's life when necessary. A person with greed cannot do what is good, because he always wants to take and not give. Therefore, a person saved from his own greed is spared the need to overcome this obstacle. He moves on to give generously with a feeling of gratification. This is true success.

"*Those who come after them pray: 'Our Lord! Forgive us and forgive our brethren who preceded us in faith. Leave no malice in our hearts towards those who believe. Lord, You are compassionate, ever merciful.'*" (Verse 10) This is the third bright picture that brings into sharp relief the features of the generation that was to follow, as well as the features of the Muslim community at all places and times.

When this *sūrah* was revealed, this group that was to follow on the heels of the Muhājirīn and the Anṣār had not yet come into existence. They were there in God's knowledge, which is free of restrictions of time and place. The main feature of this group is that they would appeal to God for forgiveness, not only for themselves but also for those believers who went ahead of them. They would also appeal to be free of all grudges against all believers, with whom they share the bond of faith. They recognized that God is most compassionate and merciful, so they would appeal to Him by these two qualities: "*Lord, You are compassionate, ever merciful.*" (Verse 10)

The true nature and wonder of the Muslim community is clearly depicted in these verses. We recognize the strong bond that unites all generations of believers generating feelings of love and compassion between them, as well as a feeling of closeness that transcends time, place,

race and family. It is a bond that takes precedence over all else, stirring pleasant feelings across generations. A believer remembers another who lived many centuries earlier, just like he remembers one who lives next door, and warms to him with love and honour. The present generation of believers takes into account the needs of future generations, and the ones still to come will follow in the footsteps of their predecessors. They all constitute one rank, in the same brigade, across generations, despite belonging to countries and times that may be very wide apart. They all march steadily, under God's banner, trying to achieve the high standards expected of them, looking up to their Lord, the Compassionate, the Ever Merciful.

It is a wonderful, amazing picture, yet it represents a reality as well as the best ideal cherished by noble hearts. The beauty and nobility of this picture of humanity can be best appreciated when compared to the image of malice and rancour that Communism glorifies in Marx's gospel.[5] That malice continues to perpetuate itself in an increasing grudge against social classes, past generations of humanity, contemporary communities that reject such social grudges, and against religion and believers of all faiths and communities.

The two situations are wide apart: they share no feature, colour or shade. One of them elevates humanity to the highest standards it can achieve, and the other takes it down to its lowest possible level. The first represents generations of humanity transcending barriers of time, place, race, country, tribe and family and promoting a bond of love and compassion, with pure hearts that are free of all grudges or selfishness, seeking only God's pleasure. The other shows humanity in conflict, with people always in strife, harbouring wicked feelings towards each other and resorting to deception, cheating and evil. It shows people doing so even when they are praying in their temples, because it looks at prayer as a trick and considers religion to be nothing but a trap set by capitalists for their workers.

"*Our Lord! Forgive us and forgive our brethren who preceded us in faith. Leave no malice in our hearts towards those who believe. Lord, You*

5. The author wrote this in the heyday of Communism when it was making long strides in the Third World generally, and in Egypt specifically where he was imprisoned and Communists were on the ascendancy. – Editor's note.

are compassionate, ever merciful." (Verse 10) Such is the prayer of the believers marching in the procession of faith. It is a noble prayer for a noble procession.

False Promises

The *sūrah* now turns back to discuss the event itself, painting a picture of another group that played a role in it, the hypocrites:

> *Are you not aware of those hypocrites who say to their brethren who disbelieve among the people of earlier revelations, 'If you are driven out, we shall most certainly go with you, and shall never pay heed to anyone against you; and if you are attacked, we shall most certainly come to your aid'? God bears witness that they are indeed liars. If they are driven out, they will not go with them; and if they are attacked, they will not help them. Even if they come to their aid, they will most certainly turn their backs in flight; and in the end they will have no help. You, [believers,] arouse in their hearts a fear more intense than their fear of God, because they are devoid of understanding. They will never fight you even in a body except from within fortified strongholds or from behind walls. Strong is their internal hostility. You may think that they are united when in fact their hearts are at odds with one another, because they are people who will not use their reason. Like those who, a short while before them, had to taste the evil that came from their own doings. Painful suffering is in store for them. Like Satan, who says to man, 'Reject the faith!' Yet when man disbelieves, Satan says, 'I here and now disown you. I fear God, the Lord of all the worlds.' Both will end up in the fire, where they will abide. Such is the reward of the wrongdoers.* (Verses 11–17)

The *sūrah* reports on what the hypocrites said to the al-Naḍīr Jews, promising them support, but then letting them down and showing that they cared nothing for their own promises. Every sentence in these verses states a fact, touches hearts, stirs up feelings and establishes a principle of education, knowledge and unshakeable faith.

The first of these establishes a bond of kinship between the hypocrites and the unbelievers from among the people of earlier revelations: "*Are*

you not aware of those hypocrites who say to their brethren who disbelieve among the people of earlier revelations..." (Verse 11) The ones to whom the *sūrah* refers as people of earlier revelations are unbelievers, and the hypocrites are their brethren, despite the fact that they claim to be Muslims. Then the *sūrah* gives a full and vivid picture of the hypocrites' promises and assurances to their brethren: "*If you are driven out, we shall most certainly go with you, and shall never pay heed to anyone against you; and if you are attacked, we shall most certainly come to your aid*'?" (Verse 11) God, who knows what they truly are, states and confirms otherwise: "*God bears witness that they are indeed liars. If they are driven out, they will not go with them; and if they are attacked, they will not help them. Even if they come to their aid, they will most certainly turn their backs in flight; and in the end they will have no help.*" (Verses 11–12) Events confirmed that what God stated was true and what they promised their brethren was false.

The *sūrah* then states a fact explaining what those people, hypocrites and unbelievers from among the people of earlier religions, truly felt: "*You, [believers,] arouse in their hearts a fear more intense than their fear of God, because they are devoid of understanding.*" (Verse 13) They feared the believers more than they feared God. Had they truly feared God, they would not have feared anyone else. Only one type of fear can exist in a person's heart; fear of God can never exist side by side with fear of anyone else. All might belongs to God alone. All powers in the universe are subject to His will: "*There is no living creature which He does not hold by its forelock.*" (11: 56) Why, then, would a God-fearing person feel afraid of anyone else? However, the people who do not understand this truth fear God's creatures more than they fear Him. This, "*because they are devoid of understanding.*" (Verse 13)

Thus the *sūrah* exposes the truth about those people, and adds another general truth. Now, the *sūrah* goes on to describe a condition particular to the two parties, the hypocrites and the unbelievers among the people of earlier religions. This condition arises from the fact that they fear the believers more than they fear God: "*They will never fight you even in a body except from within fortified strongholds or from behind walls. Strong is their internal hostility. You may think that they are united when in fact*

their hearts are at odds with one another, because they are people who will not use their reason." (Verse 14)

Time continues to reveal the absolute accuracy of this delineation of the true character of the hypocrites and the people of earlier revelations whenever and wherever they meet the believers in battle. Recent clashes in the Holy Land between volunteer believers and the Jews have confirmed the accuracy of this description. They would not fight the believers except in their own fortified settlements in Palestine.[6] Whenever they were exposed, they scuttled away like rats. It is almost as if this verse was referring to what happened recently. All glory belongs to God, the All-Knowing, the All-Aware.

The verse adds other features of their mentality: "*Strong is their internal hostility. You may think that they are united when in fact their hearts are at odds with one another.*" (Verse 14) This picture contrasts with that of the believers who are united by the bond of faith across all generations and whose brotherhood transcends barriers of time, place, race, country and tribe. The hypocrites and unbelievers conversely are in disarray "*because they are people who will not use their reason.*" (Verse 14)

Appearances may at times be deceptive so as to give us an impression that the unbelievers among the people of earlier revelations stand in solid alliance, supporting one another. We may also see the hypocrites closing ranks in one group. However, we are told their true condition by God Himself who says that they are not truly so; it is all deception. This cover is lifted at times to reveal the truth of God's description, exposing conflicts within the same alliance, because those allies have different interests, preferences and directions. Never have the believers been true to their faith without seeing the opposite party revealing such differences and conflicts. The believers need only be determined, show perseverance in adversity, and they will inevitably see that the bonds uniting those followers of falsehood disappear to show their acute differences; this then leads them to scheme against each other.

6. The author is referring here to the battles that took place in 1948, when groups of Islamic volunteers took part in the war, trying to prevent the establishment of the state of Israel. The Jewish fighters did not fear the Arab armies as much as they feared those volunteers. – Editor's note.

The hypocrites and the unbelievers from among the people of earlier revelations are able to gain the upper hand against the Muslims when the Muslims are disunited. In this way, the Muslims no longer reflect the true conditions of believers as outlined earlier in the *sūrah*. Otherwise, the hypocrites and unbelievers are too weak to be able to gain mastery over believers. Besides, they have different leanings and interests: "*Strong is their internal hostility. You may think that they are united when in fact their hearts are at odds with one another.*" (Verse 14)

The Qur'ān wants this fact to be firmly settled in believers' minds so that they know the truth about their enemies and do not stand in awe of them. It thus seeks to influence their feelings and morale on the basis of established fact. When Muslims take the Qur'ān seriously, they think little of their enemies, who are God's own enemies. They stand united, in one line. When they do so, no worldly power can match them.

Those who believe in God must know the truth about themselves and their enemies. This is half the battle. The Qur'ān puts this truth to them in the context of an event that has already taken place, enlightening them about the true factors that were at play and explaining what it signified and the facts to which it pointed. This explanation was useful to those who witnessed that event as it unfolded. It should provide great enlightenment to future generations who should reflect on it and learn the truth from the One who knows all truth.

In Satan's Footsteps

This evacuation of the al-Naḍīr from Madīnah was not the first of its kind. It was preceded by the evacuation of the Qaynuqā' tribe, to which the following verse most probably refers:

> *Like those who, a short while before them, had to taste the evil that came from their own doings. Painful suffering is in store for them.* (Verse 15)

The encounter with the Jewish tribe of Qaynuqā' took place after the Battle of Badr, but before the Battle of Uḥud. The Qaynuqā' were bound by a treaty with the Prophet and the Muslims. When the Muslims won a great victory against the unbelievers in Badr, the Jews

were upset and harboured a grudge against the Muslims. They feared that their position in Madīnah would be weakened while the position of the Muslims would be strengthened. The Prophet got wind of what they were whispering to one another and learnt of their ill intentions. He reminded them of the treaty he had signed with them and warned them that their attitude might augur ill. They replied rudely to him, saying: "Muḥammad! Do not think too highly of your power. You have only encountered a group who knew little about fighting a war and you managed to score a victory against them. Should you engage us in battle, you will certainly know that we are true fighters."

They followed this with repeated provocations against the Muslims. Reports mention that a Muslim woman took some merchandise to sell at the Qaynuqāʿ market place, and sat close to a jeweller's shop. People there tried to get her to lift her head covering, but she refused. The jeweller held the edge of her dress and fixed it behind her back while she was unaware. When she rose, the lower part of her body was exposed. The Jews around laughed at her, while she cried out in shame. A Muslim was near by and he immediately attacked the jeweller and killed him. The Jews rushed to the Muslim and killed him. The family of the Muslim who was killed appealed to other Muslims for help, and the Muslim community was in anger. Tension rose and there was a confrontation between the Muslim community and the Jewish Qaynuqāʿ tribe.

The Prophet laid siege to the Qaynuqāʿ Jews until they gave up and declared that they would accept the Prophet's ruling. ʿAbdullāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl, the chief of the hypocrites, argued with the Prophet on their behalf, citing the fact that for long they were allies of the al-Khazraj Anṣārī tribe. His true motive, however, was the strong bond between the hypocrites and the unbelievers among the people of earlier religions. The Prophet accepted his pleas and allowed them to leave Madīnah, taking with them all their property, except for arms. They left for Syria.

It is to this encounter that the *sūrah* refers. It cites it as a comparable case to that of the al-Naḍīr and the true facts behind the attitude they took towards the Muslim community and the reality of their collaboration with the hypocrites.

The *sūrah* also refers to how the hypocrites tried hard to persuade their brethren unbelievers, the Jews of al-Naḍīr, to put up stiff resistance, and

thus led them to their miserable fate. It compares this to a permanent situation in which Satan always lets down anyone who responds to his persuasion and disbelieves in God. Thus both end up in the worst of all situations:

> *Like Satan, who says to man, 'Reject the faith!' Yet when man disbelieves, Satan says, 'I here and now disown you. I fear God, the Lord of all the worlds.' Both will end up in the fire, where they will abide. Such is the reward of the wrongdoers.* (Verses 16–17)

Satan's role with any human being who responds to his promptings, as described in these verses, is in line with his nature and the aim he defined for himself. It is most singular for any human being to listen to him when he is out to trick them and lead them to their ruin. Yet this is the permanent truth which the *sūrah* states as its discussion of the event progresses further. It thus links the individual event with this permanent truth, setting it in real context. The Qur'ān does not state abstract theories, true as these may be, because a truth stated in an abstract setting does not influence hearts, feelings and minds. This is the difference between the Qur'ānic method that seeks to involve people's hearts and the methods followed by philosophers and those engaged in research.

Thus the *sūrah* completes its discussion of the al-Naḍīr, having put into it a large number of images, facts and directives, linking its local events to great and permanent facts. The *sūrah* thus represents a journey taking us far into the real world and into the world of human conscience. It goes far beyond the event itself. Its reporting in God's book is so different from the way it is reported in books written by human beings. The difference is as immeasurable as the difference between anything of man's making and what God makes.

Two Unequal Groups

The *sūrah* now addresses the believers, calling them by the quality they love best, distinguishing them from all others and making it easy for them to be positive. They are called upon to remain God-fearing, to

take stock of what they prepare for their life to come, to be always alert and make sure that they do not follow in the footsteps of those earlier people who forgot God. The believers have already seen the fate that befell some of these who are destined for the fire of hell:

> *Believers, have fear of God. Let every soul consider carefully what it sends ahead for tomorrow. Remain God-fearing, for God is fully aware of all that you do. Be not like those who forget God, so God causes them to forget their own souls. They are the transgressors. Not equal are the ones destined for the fire and the ones destined for paradise. Those who are destined for paradise are indeed the ones who will triumph.* (Verses 18–20)

Such fear of God is a mental state that words cannot fully describe. It is a condition that makes the human heart alert, feeling God's presence at every moment. It keeps man always on the watch, fearing that God may see him in a condition that displeases Him. A believer knows that God's eye watches everyone and every heart at every moment. How and when can man be in a situation that God does not see?

"*Let every soul consider carefully what it sends ahead for tomorrow.*" (Verse 18) Again, this is a statement that means far more than the total sum of its words. The mere thought of it places before a man's heart the record of all actions he did throughout his life. He looks carefully at every line, adding up his total sum after looking at every detail. When he has done so, he knows what he has sent ahead of him for his future life. This alerts him to his weaknesses and shortcomings, even though he has done much good. How would he feel if his net balance shows little in the way of good actions? This is bound to keep the human heart always awake, looking always for ways and means to improve its record of good deeds.

This verse, which excites all these feelings among believers, adds further notes to increase their sensitivity and strengthen their feelings of awe as they look at their position with God: "*Remain God-fearing, for God is fully aware of all that you do.*" (Verse 18)

The next verse warns them against a totally different situation: "*Be not like those who forget God, so God causes them to forget their own souls.*"

(Verse 19) This is a very strange situation, but a true one. Anyone who forgets God will remain in this present life without a bond that pulls him towards a higher horizon. He lives without a goal that gives his life a meaning higher than that of grazing cattle. In such a situation man becomes oblivious of his own humanity. This fact leads to another whereby such a person forgets his own soul. He makes no preparation for his next life, which is long-lasting, permanent. He does not take account of it when he looks at the balance of his deeds. "*They are the transgressors.*" (Verse 19)

The following verse states that such people are the dwellers of the fire. It advises the believers to take a route different from theirs. After all, the believers are the ones going to heaven and their route is bound to be different: "*Not equal are the ones destined for the fire and the ones destined for paradise. Those who are destined for paradise are indeed the ones who will triumph.*" (Verse 20)

The two groups are different in nature, condition, way of life, direction and destiny. They are set on two different courses, which cannot meet in line, feature, plan, strategy or method of action. They cannot be in the same camp, neither in this present life nor in the future one. "*Those who are destined for paradise are indeed the ones who will triumph.*" (Verse 20) Thus their fate is clearly stated, but that of the ones destined for the fire of hell is not even mentioned. It is too well known to deserve mention.

The Influence of the Qur'ān

The *sūrah* now adds a powerful note that shakes hearts to the core. It portrays what effect the Qur'ān would have had on solid rocks had it been so sent down:

> *Had We brought down this Qur'ān upon a mountain, you would have seen it humble itself and break asunder for fear of God. We put such images before people so that they may reflect.* (Verse 21)

This image reflects the truth. This Qur'ān has such weight, power and shaking influence that is absolutely irresistible when we receive it

as it truly is. 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb had such an experience when he overheard a reciter reading the opening of *Sūrah* 52: "*By Mount Sinai; by a scripture inscribed on unrolled parchment; by the much-visited House; by the vault raised high; by the swelling sea; your Lord's punishment will indeed come to pass. Nothing can stop it...*" (52: 1–8) As he listened, he leaned on a wall nearby. He then went back home and felt ill. People kept visiting him for a month, enquiring after his health.

The moments when a person is fully receptive of some truth contained in the Qur'ān will see him shake and shudder. He will experience such changes that are best represented in the physical world by the effects of magnetism and electricity or even stronger. God, the Creator of the mountains who bestowed the Qur'ān from on high, says: "*Had We brought down this Qur'ān upon a mountain, you would have seen it humble itself and break asunder for fear of God.*" (Verse 21) Anyone who has had some experience of the Qur'ān touching their inner souls will appreciate this truth in a way that cannot be otherwise expressed. "*We put such images before people so that they may reflect.*" (Verse 21) Such an image should keep hearts thinking and reflecting.

God's Attributes

The rest of the *sūrah* is devoted to a long glorification of God, citing a number of His names and attributes. This serves as an aspect of the influence of the Qur'ān on the universe. It is as if we see the universe as a person expressing this glorification with his mouth, and a vast kingdom echoing it in every corner. These attributes of God have clear effects on the very nature of the universe, its phenomena and interactions. As it offers this glorification, it testifies to the truth of these attributes and their effects:

> *He is God: there is no deity other than Him. It is He who knows all that is beyond the reach of anyone's perception, as well as all that which can be witnessed. He is the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful. He is God: there is no deity other than Him, the Sovereign, the Holy, the Source of Peace, the Giver of Faith, the Guardian over all, the Almighty, the Compeller, to whom all greatness belongs. Exalted is God in His limitless*

> *glory above anything they associate as partner with Him. He is God: the Creator, the Maker who gives shape and form to all. His are the most gracious names. Everything in the heavens and earth extols His limitless glory. He alone is the Almighty, the Wise.* (Verses 22–24)

It is an expansive glorification that puts together a number of God's glorious attributes. It consists of three parts, with each beginning with God's oneness in the form of either, "*He is God: there is no deity other than Him*," or, "*He is God*," on its own. Each one of these most gracious names or attributes has its clear bearing on the universe and a felt influence on human life. Thus they bring home to the human heart their effect on life and the living. They are not negative attributes. Nor are they isolated from the universe, its situations, phenomena and events.

"*He is God: there is no deity other than Him.*" This imprints on our consciousness the truth of God's oneness in belief, worship, action and life conduct from the beginning of creation to its final end. On the basis of this oneness a whole code of living is based, regulating our way of thinking, feeling, behaviour, relations with the universe and its living creatures, as well as relations with people.

"*It is He who knows all that is beyond the reach of anyone's perception, as well as all that which can be witnessed.*" (Verse 22) This divine attribute makes us clearly conscious of God's knowledge of everything, apparent or hidden. This awakes in our consciences the need to watch out, keeping God always in our thoughts, public and private. Thus, man will go about his life feeling that he is being watched by God and that he himself is on the watch for God's sake, realizing that he does not live alone, not even when he is in seclusion or locked alone with one other in private conversation. His actions will be coloured by this feeling that keeps him always on guard.

"*He is the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful.*" (Verse 22) Now a feeling of reassurance spreads within man's conscience as he feels the air of God's mercy spread over him. Feelings of awe and hope, fear and reassurance are well balanced within him. In the believer's concept, God does not chase His creatures, but watches them; He does not wish them harm, but loves that they should adhere to His guidance; He does not abandon them to struggle against evil without providing help for them.

"*He is God: there is no deity other than Him.*" (Verse 23) This is repeated at the beginning of the second part of this expansive glorification of God, because it provides the basis for all divine attributes.

"*The Sovereign.*" (Verse 23) This attribute imprints on our hearts the truth that there is no sovereignty or dominion to anyone other than God who has no partners. When there is one sovereign, those who are subject to that sovereignty will have only one master to serve. No one can serve two masters at the same time: "*Never has God put two hearts in one man's body.*" (33: 4)

"*The Holy.*" (Verse 23) This attribute radiates absolute holiness and purity. It strikes our hearts with purity, keeps them cleansed, suited to receive the grace of the Holy Sovereign, and all to extol His limitless glory.

"*The Source of Peace.*" (Verse 23) Again, this attribute radiates peace, security and reassurance throughout the universe and in man's own soul. Man feels that he is safe, under God's care and protection, in peace with the world around him and all its dwellers. As man reflects on this attribute, he is reassured, regaining a feeling of peace and extending peace to all.

"*The Giver of Faith.*" (Verse 23) The very pronunciation of this attribute, *al-Mu'min*, gives a believer a clear sense of the value of faith. Here, a believer meets with God and draws on one of His attributes, rising by virtue of his faith to join the community on high.

"*The Guardian over all.*" (Verse 23) This begins a new set of attributes that contribute to our concept of Him. The previous attributes related to Him only. These new ones relate to His action as He conducts life, the universe and all affairs. These attributes imply His absolute control and watchfulness.

The same applies to the other three attributes stated in this verse, "*The Almighty, the Compeller, to whom all greatness belongs.*" (Verse 23) They all emphasize power, authority and superiority. None is more powerful or has greater authority than Him, just as no one can be in any way superior to Him. These attributes belong to God alone; none share them with Him in any way. Hence the verse ends with the statement: "*Exalted is God in His limitless glory above anything they associate as partner with Him.*" (Verse 23)

The last verse of the *sūrah* begins the third section of this expansive glorification of God, and again it begins with a statement of His oneness: "*He is God.*" (Verse 24) Whoever else is not God. He is "*the Creator, the Maker.*" The Creator stresses design and proportion, while the Maker stresses the process of bringing things into reality. The two attributes are intertwined, and the difference between them is subtle. "*Who gives shape and form to all.*" (Verse 24) This attribute is also closely related to the two before it. It means that God is the One who gives every creature its distinctive features and specific qualities that make up its personality.

The succession of these interlinked qualities, with their subtle differences, prompts us to follow the process of creation and initiation, stage by stage, as we humans conceive of it. In actual fact, there are no stages or steps. What we know of these attributes is not their absolute reality, because this is known only to God. We only know some of the effects they produce, as this is the limit of our understanding.

"*His are the most gracious names.*" (Verse 24) His names are, in themselves, most gracious. They need not be praised or admired by creatures. The Arabic adjective *al-ḥusnā*, translated here as '*the most gracious*', also means 'beautiful, attractive, etc.' They are the attributes a believer reflects upon in order to mould himself and his life in accordance with their meaning. He knows that God loves that he should try to live up to them so that he can elevate himself as He seeks God's acceptance.

This long and expansive glorification of God, citing many of His most gracious attributes, with all their inspiring effects, is brought to a close with the image that God's glorification is echoed throughout the universe, with every creature joining in: "*Everything in the heavens and earth extols His limitless glory. He alone is the Almighty, the Wise.*" (Verse 24) This is the most suitable and expected of images after the mentioning of all God's attributes. Thus the human heart joins in with all creatures and living things in a glorification that brings the opening of the *sūrah* and its ending into perfect harmony.